

The Genres of Omelas

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Prompt

Choose a text or story studied in the unit. In 1500 words, critically analyse how it functions as an example of its genre/s and what devices or techniques the writer employs to attempt to make the piece work.

Essay

In *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* (2015a), Ursula K. Le Guin depicts a utopia dependent on the isolation and suffering of one child. In this essay, I will discuss how *Omelas* is utopian and dystopian fiction, argue that *Omelas* is fantasy, and discuss its coverage of the theme of ethics present in all three genres.

Utopian fiction describes an “Ideal State” (Stabelford 2020), where “sociopolitical institutions, norms, and individual relationships are organized according to a *more perfect principle* than in the author’s community” (Fitting 2010 p. 135). *Omelas*’s narrator describes Omelas in a utopic manner, calling it “the city of happiness” (Le Guin 2015a, p. 262) and outlining in the first half of *Omelas* that it has no king, swords, slaves, stock exchange, advertising, secret police, bombs, clergy or soldiers, and “singularly few” laws, yet rejects that the citizens are “simple folk”, “bland utopians” or barbarians (pp. 256, 258). The narrator has readers imagine Omelas “as [their] own fancy bids”, saying its citizens “could perfectly well have [various modern conveniences]. Or they could have none of that: it doesn’t matter. As you like it” (p. 257).

In contrast, dystopian fiction depicts “hypothetical societies . . . worse than our own” (Stabelford and Langford 2019). Later in *Omelas*¹, the narrator details a tiny, locked, windowless room in Omelas imprisoning a nine-year-old child, visited only to be given food and water (Le Guin 2015a, pp. 259-260). They claim the Omelasians “understand that their happiness . . . depend[s] wholly on this child’s abominable misery” (p. 260), and “[t]he terms are strict and absolute; there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child” (p. 261)². Depending on the reader’s and citizens’ views, this Karamazovian bargain is too high a price for utopia, making Omelas a dystopia. The child as a Karamazovian scapegoat exemplifies a dystopian trope (*Powered by a Forsaken Child* 2020) and qualifies Omelas as an example of several common types of dystopias (*Dystopia* 2020): false utopias (*False Utopia* 2020), societies with sinister secrets (*Empire with a Dark Secret* 2020) and settings where everything seems perfect and bright and happy, but underneath is horrifying (*Crapsacharine World* 2020).

Omelas’s TV Tropes page suggests it critiques dystopian fiction and readers’ pessimistic rejection of unironic utopias “without some sort of catch” (*The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* 2020). The narrator addresses this when noting our “bad habit . . . of considering happiness as . . . stupid. Only pain is intellectual, only evil is interesting” (Le Guin 2015a, pp. 256-257), and calls back to it later when they question if the reader is convinced that Omelas is genuinely utopic before (pp. 257, 259) and after (p. 262) the child’s reveal. However, Le Guin’s note after quoting James’s formulation of the Karamazovian bargain (1891, p. 333) that “[t]he dilemma of the American conscience can hardly be better stated” (Le Guin 2015a, p. 254) suggests that *Omelas* also unironically considers the

¹ You can pinpoint the exact paragraph (Le Guin 2015, p. 259) where *Omelas*’s tone shifts and the narrator goes from describing Omelas’s utopic surface to detailing its dystopic foundation: “Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing.”

² From here on, I will be using the following shorthand terms for brevity: Karamazovian bargain: an exchange as described above; Karamazovian utopia: a utopia dependent on such a bargain; and Karamazovian scapegoat: the one who must suffer in such a utopia.

bargain's ethics. If *Omelas* only critiqued, I suspect Le Guin wouldn't have concluded *Omelas* by describing how some choose to leave the city, perhaps instead extending the preceding line "Now do you believe in them? Are they not more credible?" (Le Guin 2015a, p. 262).

Despite *Omelas* clearly being utopian and dystopian fiction³, in the unit this essay was written for, it was a reading for fantasy (Beasley, Royal and Dunn 2020), not speculative fiction (Novitz 2020c)⁴. Why?

Firstly, *Omelas*'s worldbuilding incorporates elements that, while not exclusive to fantasy, are pervasive within it: alternate worlds and chosen ones. An alternate world "superficially resembles Earth . . . but also differs from it in important ways" (Long 2011, p. 2). Alternate worlds are such a hallmark of fantasy that Manlove, Lynn and Swinfen all include "secondary worlds" in their sub-categories of fantasy (Hunt 2003, p. 11), and Hickson (2019) devotes half of *On Writing and Worldbuilding* to their construction. *Omelas* is such a setting, and is constructed by the narrator and the reader as the story progresses (Le Guin 2015a, p. 257). Without the context of the world around *Omelas*, it seems closer in scope to Plato's Atlantis (1892) than the stereotype of alternate fantasy worlds like Tolkien's Middle-Earth (1954) or the *Elder Scrolls* videogames' Nirn (Bethesda Game Studios 1994).

A chosen one is a character chosen as the only one who can resolve the plot by performing a particular task (Hickson 2019, p. 90). Two of the best-known examples, Anakin Skywalker (Lucas 1977), and Harry Potter (Rowling 1997), come from fantasy. The child can be construed as a negative chosen one: only by them suffering "abominable misery" (i.e. the task) (Le Guin 2015a, p. 260) can *Omelas* be utopic (i.e. plot resolution). Consequently, the child parallels the biblical (scape)goat (Leviticus 16:21-22) and Jesus (Dostoyevsky 2009, p. 308).

What cements *Omelas* as fantasy, however, is that its Karamazovian bargain functions at all. Establishing a Karamazovian utopia would be impossible in fiction reflecting real life constraints and unreasonable in hard science fiction (Nicholls 2019, Novitz 2020a). It could be possible in soft science fiction (Nicholls 2011, Novitz 2020a) if using a *Monsters, Inc.*-like conversion of emotion into resources (Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios 2001). However:

- 1) The reader chooses *Omelas*'s technology level. There's no guarantee that it will be sufficiently advanced (Le Guin 2015a, p. 257).
- 2) The child's room is described as "a mere broom closet or disused tool room" with a dirt floor and foul mops in one corner (p. 259), violating the technological or aesthetic expectations for a chamber with the requisite technology built in, and a similar device is not noted to be in the room,
- 3) The language relating to the solution used ("Those are the terms . . . [t]he terms are strict and absolute" (p. 261)) doesn't fit a technological solution.
- 4) Surely such technology, if engineered competently, would only falter momentarily when detecting a lapse in the child's misery rather than let "all the prosperity and beauty and delight of *Omelas* . . . wither and be destroyed" if even one "kind word" were spoken to the child (p. 261)?⁵

³ Its utopian and dystopian nature should be very clear when reading it; searching "omelas" on Google Scholar will quickly turn up pieces discussing it in relation to those genres; and its TV Tropes page is filled with dystopian tropes (The Ones Who Walk Away From *Omelas* 2020).

⁴ When picking a piece to analyse for this essay, I initially wanted to write about *The Rule of Names* (Le Guin 2015b), having misremembered which of the two was a reading for this unit (*LIT10003 Reading and Writing Genre Texts*). (To be fair, *The Rule of Names* was a reading I had last semester in *LIT10002 Writing Fiction*, so that might have been the source of my confusion.) When I told a classmate I'd be discussing *Omelas* as fantasy, they were surprised I thought it was fantasy.

⁵ "Fire whoever designed that chamber. KaibaCorp's Karamazov Chambers shouldn't break that easily." – Seto Kaiba, probably, if he was in charge of a technological *Omelas* and the device was that faulty (Studio Gallop 2016).

The quotes cited in points three and four would make more sense if referring to a divine pact or the conditions of a warlock's enchantment, thus implying the key ingredient of fantasy (Long 2011, p. 2; Hickson 2019, p. 105) enforces Omelas's Karamazovian bargain: magic. That the bargain's rules are thoroughly explained to the reader and the children of Omelas, even if we don't understand its internal workings, makes it an example of hard magic (Sanderson 2007), similar to bending from *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (DiMartino and Konietzko 2005) and allomancy, feruchemy and hemalurgy from Brandon Sanderson's *Mistborn* trilogy (2006). Even so, the bargain is the only example of magic shown and its magical nature must be inferred, qualifying *Omelas* as low fantasy (Long 2011, p. 10).⁶

Much of fantasy is "moral in character, depicting the different natures of good and evil [and] viewing conduct in ethical terms" (Hunt 2003, p. 9). Ethical questions are inherent to utopian and dystopian fiction, given their focus on societies that, in the author's opinion, are better (Fitting 2010, p. 135; Stabelford 2020) and worse (Stabelford and Langford 2019) than their own context. Fittingly, *Omelas*'s Karamazovian bargain plays right into the theme of ethics, and intersects with questions the chosen one trope is sometimes used to ask. Some chosen one narratives ask whether the task the chosen one is prophesied to do is a good thing because of destiny (Hickson 2019, p. 93), or whether "the methods required [are] morally justified" (p. 96). Here, the Karamazovian bargain replaces the stereotypical chosen one prophecy in asking these questions, serving as "the central point of tension" and source of "the philosophical and character" conflicts in the narrative (p. 97). Normally, the ones confronted with questions about the ethicality of the chosen one's role are the chosen one themselves and their companions. In *Omelas*, the child has been stripped of all agency and forced into their role. Questions of whether the Karamazovian bargain is too high a price for utopia are asked not of the chosen one, but the other citizens and the audience instead. They must consider whether to embrace or surrender to the bargain, and accept that the child "would not get much good of its freedom" (Le Guin 2015a, p. 261) or apply an ethical system permissive of the bargain, such as ethical egoism or act utilitarianism (Nathanson 2014?), or whether to invoke other ethical systems like common sense morality, rule utilitarianism (depending on the rules involved) (Nathanson 2014?), rights-based or other duty-based approaches, or the Golden Rule (Fieser 2000?) and reject the child's torment for the sake of the flute-player, forsake the Karamazovian utopia and "walk away from Omelas" (Le Guin 2015a, p. 262), or – though not presented as an option in the text – whether to stay and reform Omelas (Levitas and Sargisson 2003, p. 14). This question parallels the real-world disparity between developed and developing countries' living standards, with many in the former fearing that helping the latter "might reduce the standard of living of the [developed world]" (Sargent 2003, p. 228).

As described by *Omelas*'s narrator, Omelas is a city whose utopic nature is achieved through dystopic means. Its worldbuilding incorporates tropes prevalent in fantasy, and the specifics of those dystopic means can be inferred to be supernatural in nature, and play into the theme of ethics, which is present in much of fantasy and inherent to utopian and dystopian fiction. Consequently, *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* (Le Guin 2015a) qualifies as utopian, dystopian, and fantasy fiction.

⁶ Or, you might disagree entirely with my arguments for *Omelas* as fantasy. Even so, you can't deny that the bargain departs from the possibilities of "consensus reality of everyday experience" to "comment on, or speculate about, society [and] humanity", making it speculative fiction at the very least (Oziewicz 2017).

Glossary

Genres of Fiction

Dystopian Fiction: fiction set in or concerned with exploring dystopias, “hypothetical societies containing images of worlds worse than our own” (Stabelford and Langford 2019).

Fantasy: a genre of fiction “evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of the supernatural and which the mortal characters of the story or the readers become on at least partially familiar terms” (Hunt 2003, p. 10). The most important feature of fantasy that sets it apart from other genres is magic (Long 2011, p. 2; Hickson 2019, p. 105).

Hard Science Fiction: science fiction where the scientific elements fall within proven or reasonably possible science (Nicholls 2019, Novitz 2020a).

Low Fantasy: fantasy fiction where the supernatural elements of the setting are used more sparingly (Long 2011, p. 10). Often the story is focused on a handful of characters rather than the fate of the world, on grimmer subject matter than other fantasy subgenres, or on greater realism or credibility (Novitz 2020b).

Soft Science Fiction: science fiction featuring less scientifically realistic technology, focusing more on the feelings of the characters (Nicholls 2011, Novitz 2020a).

Speculative Fiction: in contemporary usage, speculative fiction is “a super category for all genres that deliberately depart from imitating “consensus reality” of everyday experience”, such as fantasy, science fiction and horror, and includes all “writing which makes use of fantastic and inventive elements to comment on, or speculate about, society, humanity, life, the cosmos, reality [a]nd any other topic under the general heading of philosophy” (Oziewicz 2017).

Utopian Fiction: “the verbal construction of a particular quasi human community where sociopolitical institutions, norms, and individual relationships are organized according to a *more perfect principle* than in the author’s community” (Fitting 2010 p. 135); i.e. fiction set in or concerned with exploring a utopia, an “Ideal State” (Stabelford 2020).

Fantasy

Alternate World: a staple of fantasy (Hunt 2003, p. 11), an alternate world is a fictional world “that superficially resembles Earth . . . but also differs from it in important ways”, whether that be by unique geography, fantasy races and creatures, or other means. It “doesn’t literally have to be *another* world”; settings that are Earth with extensive differences from reality “are in effect “alternate” even though they’re not defined [in-universe] as a separate reality” (Long 2011, p. 2).

Chosen One: a character chosen, whether by prophecy, destiny, magical artefacts or other people, as the only one who can fill a particular role or complete a particular task that a narrative’s plot revolves around, such as “defeat the Dark Lord, wield the macguffin of power, or inherit the throne” (Hickson 2019, p. 90).

Hard Magic: magic where the author “explicitly describes the rules”, such that when it’s used to solve problems in the narrative, “it’s not the magic mystically making everything better”, but rather “the characters’ wit and experience that solves the problems” (Sanderson 2007).

Soft Magic: magic where the reader doesn’t understand its rules and capabilities, that is more intended “to establish a sense of wonder and give the setting a fantastical feel” than for use by the characters in a narrative to solve their problems (Sanderson 2007).

Ethics

Act Utilitarianism: a version of utilitarianism that says that “whenever we are deciding what to do, we should perform the action that will create the greatest net utility”, with such decisions to be made on a case by case basis (Nathanson 2014?)

Common Sense Morality: commonly held moral beliefs that are deemed to be common sense (Nathanson 2014?).

Consequentialism: a moral theory that posits that whether actions are right or wrong depends on their effects (Nathanson 2014?), and that “morality is *all* about producing the right kinds of overall consequences” (Haines 2003?).

Duty Theories: “[m]any of us feel that there are clear obligations we have as human beings, such as to care for our children, and to not commit murder. Duty theories base morality on specific, foundational principles of obligation” (Fieser 2000?).

Ethical Egoism: a version of utilitarianism that says “an action is morally right if the consequences of that action are more favourable than unfavourable *only to the agent* performing the action” (Fieser 2000?).

Rights Theory: a duty theory where “the rights of one person” (e.g. “to not be harmed by [others]”) imply “the duties of another person” (Fieser 2000?).

Rule Utilitarianism: a version of utilitarianism that says “a specific action is morally justified if it conforms to a justified moral rule”, and that “a moral rule is justified if its inclusion in our moral code would create more utility than other possible rules (or no rule at all)” (Nathanson 2014?).

The Golden Rule: the ethical principles that “[w]e should do to others what we would want others to do to us” (Fieser 2000?).

Utilitarianism: a form of consequentialism that posits one should, when evaluating options, “choose the one that will produce the best overall results”, that “maximises utility” (Nathanson 2014?).

Other

Karamazovian Bargain: the exchange of the isolation and suffering of one individual for the happiness of everyone else, as described by Ivan Karamazov in Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* (2009), mentioned by William James in discussing ethical philosophy (1891, p. 333), and used Omelas’s foundation in Le Guin’s *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* (2015a).

Karamazovian Scapegoat: the individual who, in a Karamazovian bargain, must be locked away and suffer for the happiness of everyone else, such as the child in *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* (Le Guin 2015a).

Karamazovian Utopia: a utopia achieved through a Karamazovian bargain, such as Le Guin’s Omelas (2015a).

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